

RPG Reload File 043 – 'Aralon: Sword And Shadow'

[June 18, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we strip everyone we beat and call it looting. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up in the here and now. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on important milestones, or simply to take a deeper dive than our reviews usually allow for. As the conductor of this mad orchestra, I try to bring a variety of RPGs into this feature from week to week, but I'm always open to reader suggestions. If you have a game you would like to see here, simply comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#) with your choice. The second-last regular reader's choice article is coming up in a couple of weeks, so now is the time to get your selection in. This is your chance!

All the way back in November of 2014, we covered *Ravensword: The Fallen King* ([\\$2.99](#)) in [RPG Reload File 016](#). I don't know about you, friends, but that feels like a million years ago. It's funny how a short span of time can seem longer in hindsight, especially when you've got a few stakes in the ground for comparison's sake. For another example of that in action, look no further than *Aralon: Sword And Shadow* ([Free](#)). Crescent Moon had made a name for themselves with their ambitious 3D open world RPG, and although *Aralon* was a joint development with Galoobeth Games, the comparisons between the two games were unavoidable. Following the release of *Ravensword* by just over a year, *Aralon* was seen as the next big open world RPG following in its footsteps. With such a short amount of time between the two, it was hard to guess just how much *Aralon* would expand on the limited experience of *Ravensword*, but it's safe to say that it utterly shattered most people's expectations.



Of course, that one year thing is just an illusion. Galoobeth had been working on *Aralon* for years, starting it well before *Ravensword*'s development had even started. Crescent Moon saw potential in the game and got involved both as a publisher and a co-developer. You see, gameplay-wise, *Aralon* was well on track, but the art wasn't quite living up to the rest of the game's quality. Artist Mark Jones, who had done work on several *Elder Scrolls* games, was brought in to give the game a makeover, and while he was doing his magic, Galoobeth was able to expand on and polish the game even further. You can see some before and after shots by [checking out the article Eli wrote](#) on the topic at the time, and it really is a stark difference. The game finally released in December of 2010, which isn't far off from being half a decade ago. That's quite remarkable, when you think about it. The game could release more or less as-is tomorrow and I imagine people would still be impressed with it on a certain level.

Ravensword: The Fallen King was an impressive game, no doubt about it. But it still feels like a compromise in a lot of ways. *Aralon* does not. I'm not saying it's up to modern console standards, but you wouldn't have to go back that many years to find a period where it would fit in nicely. There are tons of customization options for your character upon starting the game, including races and job classes that affect your appearance, stats, gear options, and abilities. The world is massive and full of interesting secrets and optional content to stumble across. Where *Ravensword* was short, simple, and fairly limited, *Aralon* is lengthy, packed with interesting strategies, and does a great job of conveying the feeling that you are in an actual world where anything goes.



Essentially, it's the last kind of game where you want to try to shotgun through in a week of playing. So for this replay, I decided I wasn't going to

concern myself with getting to the ending again and just sink as much time as I could into doing whatever I felt like. This time around, I played a female elven ranger named Rade, which gave me access to the extremely-useful bow and arrow set of abilities, along with a very helpful spirit wolf companion. I was also trying to play through as a lawful character, which meant I couldn't just kill and steal whenever I wanted. My first time through the game, I played a male human rogue with a penchant for evil, so it was a pretty different experience all-around. I relied heavily on arrows, which meant I constantly needed to buy more, and since not every location in the game sells them, you very much have to gather your rosebuds while you may. Unfortunately, that costs money, and without being able to loot and kill indiscriminately, it was a little harder to come by. Basically, the cost and difficulty of procuring ammo meant I could couldn't abuse my ranged attacks, especially when I was deep in a dungeon with no way of knowing when I would find my way out.

Of course, even though there are lots of attempts to balance things out, a game that gives you as many options as this one is assuredly prone to being broken. There are a couple of ways you can gain access to a levitation ability that is especially useful for engaging in such chicanery. That's part of the fun, though. In finding little tricks like that, you feel like you've cheated the game's rules, and by doing so rendered them ineffective. I think one of the best things an RPG can do to establish its world as a real place is to let the player get one over on the designer. Like it or not, the real world does have plenty of shortcuts in it, and a good game world typically benefits from having them too. The size of the world combined with your relatively free mobility within it also helps the game stand out. You can run, swim, climb, fall off of paths, and find your way into all sorts of cubby holes. The world almost feels too big at times, but the developers were wise enough to give you a means of transportation early on. In the second town, you'll get a horse. It serves the dual purpose of helping you close those wide distances while also feeling like a bit of a reward in and of itself.



One of the things I think the game does very well is in how it escalates its complexity. You start off in a tiny town with only a few buildings. You'll learn how to talk to people and accept some quests before heading out in the only direction the game offers you. The quests at this point are almost immediately solvable, save for two. One of those is the story quest that requires you to make it to the next town. It's a bit of a walk, but hardly a dangerous one. The other quest, however, requires you to enter into the gnoll caves you'll find near the town. The enemies in these caves are tough, probably too tough for a starting character. The caves themselves have simple designs that are either short or loop upon themselves, giving you little opportunity to get lost. But to solve that first quest, you'll need to do a little swimming. It's like to be the first bit of swimming you do in the game, and it's demonstrated in a relatively harmless context. That same cave will also teach you about ladders.

At this point, though, the quests are fairly simple, closed affairs. You'll solve them all before too long and follow the only real path you can for a while. That path will take you over a bridge, where you'll almost certainly notice that you can go fishing. Fish can be sold, but they're best used in recipes, so you might as well carry them around for a while. Not long after, you'll hit the gate that leads into the next area. Upon going through, it's easy to see how much more open things have become. There are side paths, the area itself is wider, and you can actually head in the wrong direction if you're not paying attention to signs. The wandering enemies have upgraded from wolves to bandits, and wild deer wander around waiting to be converted into delicious steaks. Crossing this area will give you a real appreciation for just how big *Aralon* can be, particularly since you have to do it on foot.



Eventually, you should make your way to the next town, which is at least

double the size of the first. You'll get your horse here, and likely will want to ride it around for a bit, because new toy, right? While you're doing that, you're sure to notice that there are lots of areas of interest near the town. There is significant side content to uncover here, and you may even stumble across your first set of opposing quests. Sometimes, you'll have situations where you can only satisfy one person. You'll get different rewards depending on which way you go, but it also serves as a nice chance for some role-playing. It's also likely you'll come across one of the larger dungeons yet. It has a fairly simple layout, but it's full of encounters that can be pretty tough for a novice.

The game keeps upping the ante like this as it goes along. The next city you'll visit is pretty big, though you can't enter every building, unfortunately. It makes up for it by having a massive sewer system underneath it, though. This is also likely to be where you first notice the game's alignment system at play. If you're lawful, all sorts of hooligans will attack you. Of course, if you managed to achieve outlaw status before now, you're probably quite familiar with how people react towards bad guys. This is also where the game starts dropping the lore of its world on you, courtesy of the city library, and where it introduces guilds and guild quests. Fast forward through the game and you'll be riding on flying dragons and making your way through some labyrinthine locations. This game's well-designed curve not only eases the player in, but also ensures that the hits keep coming all the way through.



With all the things there are to do, it's easy for each little bit of the game to bleed into the next. This is one of those games that is pretty hard to put down because you always feel like you're just around the corner from some new and interesting discovery. The great thing is, you probably are. Players who have good gaming habits will find themselves pleasantly surprised when they go searching around in the expected places. Even better, you'll still probably miss things that someone else found. I came across a couple of things this time around that I'm sure I missed last time. If you're playing lawful, you'll have to leave so many closed doors and locked chests behind that you'll probably start a second character just to satisfy your curiosity. With the opposing quests essentially making it impossible to do everything in a single playthrough, you'll have even more reasons to field another hero.

It's a good thing the gameplay is so fun, because the story is pretty weak

overall. The main plot doesn't have much punch, and the side quests are too simple in terms of narrative and offer little resolution. The NPCs in general are a lot less believable than the rest of the world. Many of them parrot the same lines, and nobody seems to react to much of anything that happens. Now, the structure of the game is such that the player can make a lot of fun stories of their own, but that is one aspect I'd like to see improved in the upcoming sequel. Admittedly, it can be pretty tough to pull off in games like this, as even AAA efforts like *Elder Scrolls* tend to prove. I would just love to see the story stand comfortably beside the rest of *Aralon* in its quality.



Even though *Aralon* looks dated in some ways, considering the amount of time and tech that have passed, it's still quite beautiful. The cracks show when you get close up to things and reveal some low-resolution textures and the low polygon counts of the various people, places, and things. Some of

the animations are a bit awkward as well, particularly when you're getting on or off of your mount or falling through the air. If not for all of that, it would be hard to peg it as a game from the App Store's earlier years. Some of the vistas are genuinely gorgeous, and though the polygon counts are low, objects are carefully designed to make the most of them. Most of the animations look pretty good, and textures are alright from a distance. The lighting in the current version of the game is particularly well-done, making use of colored light sources to great effect. The day-night cycle shows this part off a bit, but it's when you're plumbing caves by torchlight or the glow of various crystals that it really shines.

Aralon is a prime example of a game that benefits from an article that looks back the way we do here. When it launched, it had quite a few bugs and issues that have long since been ironed out. Updates came pretty steadily in the year after it launched, addressing various bugs, fixing the UI, and implementing Cloud support. Plenty of new content was added, including an entirely new character class, some new abilities, new areas and monsters, and a bunch of new items and recipes. One update added some non-essential IAP to the game, allowing you to break the game open even earlier than usual. After that initial flurry of updates, things quieted down until late last year. An update in September 2014 added compatibility with the larger iPhone screen sizes that had released since the game's launch, and as a special treat, all iOS 8 compatible devices enjoyed improved lighting and shadows. Unfortunately, if you weren't running iOS 8 for whatever reason, you couldn't take advantage of any of the things that came with that update. With the developers hard at work on the sequel *Aralon: Forge And Flame*, I expect we won't see many more updates for this game unless something breaks.



Going back to this game was a genuine treat. I quickly found myself totally absorbed in its world before long, and ended up putting in much longer game sessions than I usually do. I think my family will forgive me, but it's probably a good thing that I have to put this one away again and move on to the next thing. Even after all this time has passed, *Aralon: Sword And Shadow* is easily among the top original RPGs on mobile, and I can't wait to see what the developers have in store for us with the sequel.

That's just my take on *Aralon*, though. What do you all think? I want to know, so please leave your comments below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#). Don't forget to send any questions you might want answered on the **RPG Reload Podcast**, too. You can send those through the normal means or email them to rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com. Please mark them as being for the podcast or else I might just answer them

on the spot, being the helpful fellow that I am. As for me, I'll be back next week with another great RPG. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *This hectic struggle went way past its alpha.*